

GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S WHAT THE BODY REMEMBERS

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ABSTRACT

The topic which I have chosen for my paper is about the theme of gender discrimination in the novel *What the Body Remembers* (2001) by Shauna Singh Baldwin. I am mainly focusing on the issues like women's quest to search for her identity, her protest to achieve equality in a male dominated world and her struggle with age-old conventions. Their survival under lot of responsibilities like child bearing, managing household and taking care of their husbands and children become miserable because of the burden of patriarchal structures. This paper provides an insight to understand the condition of the women and the difficulties that they have to face in a male dominated world.

KEYWORDS: Age-Old Conventions, Currently Lives in Milwaukee, Gender Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Shauna Singh Baldwin was born in 1962 in Montreal Quebec. She is a Canadian-American novelist of Indian descent. Her 2000 novel *What the Body Remembers* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Canadian/Caribbean Region), and her 2004 novel *The Tiger Claw* was nominated for the Giller Prize. She currently lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her second short-story collection, *We Are Not in Pakistan*, was released in Canada in 2007. Baldwin and her husband own the Safe House,^[1] an espionage themed restaurant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

What the Body Remembers is set in the partition background is written by a half-Sikh woman. The novel focuses on the tragedy of Sikhs during partition and its emphasis is on how Sikh people have been marginalized in Partition literature. Along with the themes of madness, bloodshed and violence, gender discrimination is also an important issue. The setting is in a small village in Punjab, India. The novel clearly depicts the tragedy of Sikhs- the community of people from the northwest corner of India. The author becomes a mouthpiece for those who suffered a lot during partition. Baldwin has used her own experiences as a Sikh to sketch three main characters like Sardarji, his wife Satya and her nemesis Roop, the young girl whom Sardarji marries in secret. In this novel, Baldwin has drawn Roop's character, her longings, her fear, her courage and her endurance by using minute details of her life.

Roop and Satya are the two women married to Sardarji live under the same fear and belief (fragility of their character) yet are different from each other in their personality and character. They belong to different level of prosperity and status but both can see each other with clarity that their lives can be blown all away at the slightest show of disobedience. This kind of story is common among all women belonging to all cultures. These Sikh women surprise the readers by the strength and the courage they show in adverse circumstances and the way they bend without breaking when their world begins to fall apart and gets reshaped in permanently altered shapes.

Sardarji's first wife Satya is a very unusual and strong character. She is childless and because of this reason Sardarji marries a sixteen years old girl Roop at the age of forty two years so that she can provide him a son. Satya hates Sardarji in private for his actions but plays her public role perfectly as a wife. She doesn't surrender easily in front of

circumstances. But when she is rejected by Sardarji for not giving him heir, she feels helpless. She feels unbearable agony because of this fact that she can't give birth to a child but she buries her grief inside and doesn't even tell anybody of the pain and trauma she is suffering from, even to her mother:

But how to talk to a mother about the things that happen between a husband and a Wife in the dark? How could Satya speak of the pain of his touch, so gentle, so Forbearing, so kind- when she could not repay it with children? "A man is Pleasured", Bebeji said, "You can see it afterwards"... "But a woman is merely cracked open for seeding like the earth before the force of the plough If she is Fertile, good for the farmer, if not bad for her". (P 8)

Sathupati Prasanna remarks that:

A barren woman is a cursed one. A barren wife is pitilessly ill-treated in the Tradition bound Indian society and this is a universal phenomenon(P 57)

Satya is fully aware of the hypocrisy of this kind of society in which a woman is not treated well if she is barren. for this reason, she gets ready to accept her fate willingly and thus accepts Roop as well in her husband's life. This is a very tragic situation of her life. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati clearly remarks:

Religion, as the word is commonly understood has two distinct natures in the Hindu law, the masculine and the feminine. The masculine religion has its own Peculiar duties, privileges and honours. The feminine religion has its own peculiarities. With the anchoring of a woman to the single duty of service to her Husband, a host of responsibilities and constraints are loaded on her. (P 58).

Despite of her fulfilling her household and wifely duties, Satya is still called barren, although she is even sharper in public dealings than Sardarji. Her faithfulness and her sincerity is not taken into consideration in such an insensitive society. And she is neglected by her husband despite of her dedication to him. She is set aside because she is not able to fulfill some of the roles that the feudal and patriarchal society has set up for women. She fails to do, 'what woman are for' (P 179) that is to bear sons and heirs to the jagir. C.S. Lakshmi quotes a popular song of a Tamil movie which describes a "good woman" in her article. According to this song women are supposed to do household chores in a humble manner with humility and obedience. A proper woman according to this song is:

Follow every day the wise counsel of the father. She is one who combines Timidity, bashfulness, implicit acceptance and physical sensibility.

This is true in the case of both Roop and Satya. Satya fails to conform to the established patriarchal standards despite her love and devotion to her husband. She plays the role of a good and caring wife. Her only drawback is to converse in English during her public appearances. But she devotes extreme care to decorate the house and the table of Sardarji with the articles and objects of an affluent British household of the times. Her conversations with her husband indicate her suspicion and distrust for the Britishers. She is even not able to share the feelings of joy at her husband's posting as Executive Engineer of the Irrigation Department at Khanewal. She said quietly:

This posting and your new position are another bone that the British can throw
 Before Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, hoping to appease the non-cooperators and
 All the self-rule agitators, justify the blood spilled and the pain endured by the
 Protesters'... His secret marriage to Roop was not long thereafter. (P 186)

Satya doesn't surrender her individuality, although she accepts her husband's decision reluctantly. She cannot lower her gaze in front of Sardarji which indicates her independence spirit. She knows that what her husband demands is completely different what she feels. She knows that her defiance is not acceptable in any situation. She is expected to be shy, submissive and obedient in every respect. It's very shocking that such a loving, caring and loyal woman is blamed and rejected by her husband for not being able to bear him a son. Her sorrow and her pain is not given any consideration in her family and her existence is nullified. Satya is bold enough to speak for herself in comparison to Roop whose submissiveness becomes a drawback for her. For Satya, Roop becomes a medium to take revenge for the injustice done to her and she begins to derive pleasure in dominating Roop and treating her like a servant. She even snatches Roop's children from her and keeps them with herself:

Satya is sure of it- confidence rings in her voice as she orders Roop to wheel the
 Baby to her side. Satya treats Roop as if she and Mani Mai came from the same
 Family. Roop should consider herself lucky to get tea, two meals a day and a roof
 over her head. (P 223)

Roop obeys all the commands of Satya because she is aware of the thing is that disobeying Satya would hurt Sardarji and for that reason she might be sent back to her place where she won't be welcomed by anyone. She accepts her fate as she recognizes her inability to raise her voice against institutions. Her acceptance of her destiny doesn't mean that she doesn't possess wit and intelligence. She knows what is happening. Her silent rebellion can be noted by knowing what she utters in the ears of her new born daughter Pawan:

"Listen, but do not obey everything", she tells her baby, and begins to pour into
 Her tiny ears all she might tell her in ten, twenty, fifty years. "Always speak.
 Never be silent. Respect your elders, but don't be too generous.....Say what you
 Want. Don't be like me." (P 181)

Roop chooses to be silent although she is aware of everything that is going around her. Even when her newborn baby is given to Satya she remains silent and accepts her destiny and endures this injustice done to her. She has become aware of a bitter truth that it is not she as a human being who is expected in her husband's family but her body is in demand that plays an important role in their lives. Anne Collette comments in this context:

Men accept the body and the bodily response as natural, as part of our human
 Identity because they have been socially conditioned and sanctioned to do so. Are
 Women's bodies and bodily response any less natural, any less part of our human
 identity? (P 78)

This is very shocking that a woman is recognised by her body in our patriarchal society. It is very easy for a man

to leave one woman to get another and when husband is impotent himself then woman is expected to hide this truth for everyone because it can ruin the reputation of a man. Susan Bordo comments on the concept of femininity that it is the female body:

“Whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection,
Transformation and improvement. Through the exacting and normalizing
Disciplines of diet, make up, and dress- central organizing principles of time and
Space in the days of many women- we are rendered less socially oriented and
More centripetally focused on self- modification.”. (P 144)

Finally, she gives birth to a son and hands him over to Satya and there is no one to understand her pain, her agony and her motherhood except Mani Mai, her maid who consoles her and encourages her to speak for herself. When Satya refuses her husband to take Roop to Ramlila then she revolts for the first time and stops eating food. She goes to her father's place to attend a wedding ceremony

Where she reveals everything to her father but even gets no support from her father and blamed for choosing Sardarji as her husband. Roop realizes that this house is only for sons and not for her and she is just a guest who has come to spend few days there and ultimately have to go back to her husband's house. This is very ironical that in the house where she is born and brought up has no place for her because she is a daughter not a son. She realizes all these things and even then she decides to stay there for some time. When she is away then Sardarji realizes her place in his life and but he is so egoistic that he is not ready to accept his fault and thinks only about himself. He thinks that he has provided the facilities and comforts that a village girl like Roop could never imagine. But he forgets to think the emotional needs of a woman.

Roop's act of defiance is to be noted by the event when she calls her children to her which makes her husband furious over the matter. On the other hand, Satya feels happy to get her husband back to her bed and forgets all the wrongs and injustices done to her by her husband. But this happiness proves to be short lived as Sardarji is called to Roop's native place Pari Darvaja. Even there, when asked to answer about the whole situation he begins to speak about the social status he has given to Roop. After a lot of argument its decided that Sardarji will live with Roop and her children at Lahore and not with Satya at Pindi. Roop's revolt turns out to be fruitful to her as she gets back her identity. But situation gets worsened for Satya and she is blamed for everything. This is so natural in a patriarchal society where a man gets the clean chit and woman is blamed and criticised for every problem she has to face in her married life. And a woman is always told that she is born to endure everything. This justifies Sunny Singh's comment: “Weddings are a necessary social evil”. (P 313)

According to the rules of patriarchal society a woman should be submissive to her husband's will. In this context Simon De Beauvoir comments: “Men do not marry for themselves, whatever they may say; they marry as much or more; for their posterity, their family.” (P 454) Satya feels very tormented because she is deserted by her husband as if she is a piece of furniture which is of no use when a new one comes in. her pain is very intense because she knows that she is not wrong. Satya is a woman of strength but she feels helpless and decides to leave the world where she is not wanted. She embraces the infection of tuberculosis and dies in Sardarji's arms. Sardarji also in his heart knows that he has wronged to Satya. Roop imbibes Satya's spirit. Roop transcends all the boundaries of class, gender and religion. And she is also invested with a great deal of agency as she attempts to protect those who are dependant on her. Vibha S. Chauhan comments on Roop's evolution:

The transformative potential of her experience during the Partition also initiates a change within her being as a whole, and extends to affect even her relationship with Sardarji. In the end, we find that it is Roop who persuades Sardarji to give up his lethargy and recognize himself. (P 156) Roop emerges out as a 'new woman' by fulfilling all her duties and fighting for her rights. She finds a new meaning in her life and faces all the challenges that lie before her. She paves her way and yet maintains her dignity and existence. In this way, this novel portrays the gender discrimination in the patriarchal society and what women have to endure to survive in a male dominated society.

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